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ABSTRACT

Both the popular and professional literatures commonly suggest that the more involvement by fathers in their infants' routine care the better. However, empirical support for this position is far from conclusive. Although several researchers have reported a positive relationship between father involvement and father-infant relations, others have failed to find such a connection. In this study, fathers' responsiveness to their infants in a structured living room setting was related to their involvement in child care activities. Thirty middle class, white families with an infant (mean age 13 months) participated. Fathers' involvement was measured by a questionnaire and a 24-hour "Baby's Day Diary," which families kept for 7 days. Responsiveness was measured as the percent of the baby's social elicitations to which the father responded. A significant negative relationship was found between the fathers' responsiveness and involvement in infant care. An even stronger negative relationship was found for responsiveness to baby's proximal behaviors (e.g., the baby goes to father). These findings were tentatively interpreted as resulting from fathers' negative feelings about their involvement, which may result in role conflict. Analogous findings from related research are reviewed. (Author/CB)

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Father's involvement and affect to infant: "more" may not be "better"

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Abstract

Both the popular and professional literatures commonly suggest that "more" involvement by fathers in the infant's routine care may be "better". Empirical support for this position, however, is far from conclusive. Although several researchers have reported a positive relationship between father's involvement and father-infant relations (Easterbrooks, 1982; Field, 1978; Tinsley, Hymel, Power, & Parke, 1979), others have failed to find such a connection (Ban & Lewis, 1974; Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1982; Owen & Chase-Lansdale, 1982; Young, 1976). SEE TABLE 1. In the study reported here, fathers' responsiveness to their infants in a structured living-room setting was related to their involvement in child care activities. Fathers' involvement was measured by a questionnaire and a 24-hour Babys' Day Diary which families kept for 7 days. SEE TABLE 2. Thirty middle-class, white families with an infant (mean age 13 mon) participated in the study. Responsiveness was measured as the percent of baby's social elicitations to which the father responded. A significant negative relationship was found between father's responsiveness and involvement in infant care ($r = -.47$, $p<.05$). An even stronger relationship ($r = -.58$, $p<.01$) was found for responsiveness to baby's proximal behaviors (e.g., goes to father). Analogous findings which suggest that more involvement may have negative consequences are reviewed. This finding is interpreted as resulting from father's negative feelings about his involvement which may result in role-conflict.

Table 1

Summary of Selected Studies of Father Involvement

Author	Year	Description	Findings
		Related to infant-father relations	
Easterbrooks	1982	compared infant attachment and father involvement	infant-father attachment related to father involvement, particularly amount of father-child time alone
Field	1978	compared primary and secondary caregiving fathers	primary caregiving fathers more responsive in imitating their infants
Tinsley, Hymel Power, & Parke	1979	intervention study: treatment fathers of newborns shown tape of father-infant interaction	treatment fathers more involved and more responsive at 3 months
		Not related to infant-father relations	
Ban & Lewis	1974	compared infant behavior during free play with father and amount of time father spent with infant	no relationaship between time with infant and infant behavior during free play
Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi	1982	compared traditional and involved fathers: observed infant and paternal behavior in home	no relationship between father involvement and responsiveness
Owen & Chase-Lansdale	1982	assessed infant-father attachment and paternal involvement	no relationship between paternal involvement and attachment
Young	1976	assessed infant-father attachment and paternal involvement	no relationship between paternal involvement and attachment

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Measures
of Father Involvement (frequency per week)

Measure	Diary	Father questionnaire	r
Feed	5.78 (3.15)	4.30 (3.12)	.50*
Diaper	5.52 (4.80)	7.63 (5.61)	.58**
Bathe	1.87 (2.34)	1.93 (1.84)	.75***
Put to bed	1.57 (1.59)	3.20 (2.57)	-.33
Attend at night	0.74 (1.32)	1.97 (3.01)	.69***
Total Care	15.48 (7.54)	19.03 (11.29)	.51*
Take out	0.87 (1.10)	1.60 (1.67)	.21
Play	8.44 (4.56)	11.87 (9.53)	.40#
Total Social	9.31 (4.63)	13.47 (10.13)	.50*
Total Involved	24.78 (9.42)	32.50 (17.96)	.51*

Legend: # $p<.10$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Following observations each parent individually completed a questionnaire which asked how frequently during the past week the father had been involved in various child care activities; only fathers' responses are shown here. In addition, each family kept a 24-hour, Baby's Day Diary in which they recorded infant care for the week following the observations. Seventy-seven % (n=23) were returned in a usable form.

Results

Both fathers and mothers responded to 28% of their infant's expressive behaviors, thus showing no difference. In addition, the frequencies of fathers' and mothers' responding was not effected by infant's sex (p's >.30).

It had been hypothesized that the father's responsiveness would be related to his involvement with his infant. This was analysed by correlating the measures of father's involvement with his responsiveness. As seen in Table 3a, the diary record of care and total involvement and father's questionnaire report of total involvement predicted responsiveness, but in a negative direction. Paternal involvement measures were also correlated with the measure of father's proximal responsiveness (Table 3b). This analysis replicated the negative relationship between these items even more dramatically. Significant negative correlations were found between father's responsiveness to child's proximal elicitations and the diary reports of care and total involvement as well as the father's questionnaire report for these measures.

The hypotheses had predicted that father's responsiveness would be related to his involvement with his infant. Although not explicitly stated, there was an intuitive sense that this relationship would be positive. Hence, while the hypothesis is supported in a formal sense, it is in an unanticipated manner.

Table 3

Correlations between Father's Responsiveness and Measures of His Involvement with His Infant

(a)

Responsiveness to behavior overall

Measure	r
Diary (n=23)	
Care	-.47*
Social	-.14
Total Involved	-.45*
Father Questionnaire (n=30)	
Care	-.19
Social	-.22
Total Involved	-.24

(b)

Responsiveness to proximal behavior only

Measure	r
Diary	
Care	-.58**
Social	-.24
Total Involved	-.58**
Father Questionnaire	
Care	-.39*
Social	-.26
Total Involved	-.39*

Legend: * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

Responsiveness was calculated as the proportion of all of the infant's socioaffective behaviors (e.g., vocalize, smile, give to, touch) to which the parent responded positively. It was also calculated with reference to infant's proximal elicitations only, that is, infant's behaviors physically impinging on the parent (e.g., go to parent, give to, touch).

Discussion

Although the hypothesis only stated that paternal responsiveness would be related to involvement with the infant, there was an implicit assumption that the relation would be positive (i.e., more involved fathers would be more responsive). That was not the case; more involved fathers were less responsive. Two possible interpretations of this finding will be explored.

A first consideration involves the possibility that parents' behavior in the research setting might differ from their behavior at home (cf., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). On a questionnaire completed following observations, both parents tended to rate the "naturalness" of father's behavior in the setting moderately high (above 5 on a scale of 1 - 7) regardless of how often he responded to their infant ($p > .29$). Furthermore, according to both fathers and mothers, father's behavior in the setting was not affected by the extent of his involvement with the infant ($p > .17$). Regardless of degree of father's involvement, both parents rated his behavior as above average in "naturalness".

A disjunctive interpretation involves a consideration of <u>why</u> the father is involved. Routine involvement in infant care, as opposed to social interaction, is not normative nor (statistically) normal for fathers. It may be that fathers who routinely involve themselves in infant care may do so less from a "need to nurture" than from more rational or mundane motivations. These may include a socio-philosophical orientation that advocates unitary parenting, or family circumstances (e.g., economic necessity) such that adequate care of the child compels increased paternal involvement. In such cases, there may be discordance between the valances of paternal affect related to involvement and the degree of involvement itself.

Failure to achieve role-consistency, that is, doing what you think a person with your role should do, may lead to role-conflict and expressions of dissatisfaction with the role. Paternal involvement might result from a sense of obligation or necessity; however, this may conflict with the father's understanding of his role as parent. McKee (1982) in a critique of fathers' participation in child care suggested that what was important "was not so much how labour was performed by which individual, but the spirt in which this was done" (p. 129). Fein (1976) found that the most effective adjustment to parenthood by first-time fathers was related to adopting a coherent father-role, regardless of the type of role (involved or traditional).

In a study of marital and parenting satisfaction, it was found that the fathers who were the most involved with their 3-month-olds were the least satisfied (Goth-Owen, Stollak, Messe, Peshkess, & Watts, 1982). Belsky (1979) found a negative relation between "spousal harmony" and father's physical care of the infant. He suggested that this might indicate that some fathers did not appreciate the time they had to spend in infant care. A possibly related finding concerns involvement and divorce. In a 4-year follow-up of a study of father involvement, divorce was found to occur 2 1/2 times as often in families in which the father had initially been rated as highly involved (Radin & Goldsmith, 1983).

The lower responsiveness of involved fathers in the present study may be related to negative feelings about their involvement. This interpretation is tentatively advanced here.

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